

Testimony of P. Michael Freeman, Fire Chief, Los Angeles County Fire Department
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The role of the Los Angeles County Fire Department in responding to wildfires

The Los Angeles County Fire Department provides fire suppression and life safety services to a 2,296 square mile area within the 4,400 square mile County of Los Angeles. More than four million residents living in 58 cities and unincorporated areas are protected. We provide fire code planning for high risk wildland fire areas and respond to more than 900 reported brush fires per year, primarily during the annual fire season which typically lasts from early May until the first significant rainfall occurs within the greater Los Angeles area.

During the Southern California firestorms of October 21-31, 2007, we were able to effectively coordinate and sustain wildland firefighting operations to combat four large, complex firestorms, (some occurring concurrently) and knock down two others within our County, all of which were fanned by gusty Santa Ana winds. Once an upper hand was gained, in a small way, on these fires in Los Angeles County, personnel and equipment were offered to other areas still in peril. In total, 35 homes were lost in Los Angeles County. What really made a difference for us were the pre-planning, equipment purchases and contracts that gave us many of the resources needed to mount considerable air and ground attacks – even when multiple incidents ignited within hours.

Our Department's continual focus on pre-planning better enabled us to meet the needs of these simultaneous incidents. Throughout the year, we enforce brush clearance regulations aimed at

reducing flammable vegetation around homes and other structures to give our firefighters defensible space in the Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones and brush covered areas throughout the County. We require residents to have fire resistant landscape plans, clear 100-200-feet of brush around their homes, and actively carry out other fuel reduction practices. More recent building codes enacted require fire-resistive construction and access to a water supply for firefighters to protect homes in the event of a fire. Through public education, we also involve each local community in the development of their own escape plans so that they know exactly what to do in case of a fire emergency.

At the core of our pre-deployment planning is our focus on operational readiness so that we have the right training and equipment to fight these fires when they do occur. In preparation for each year's wildland fire season, all County firefighters participate in annual Departmental wildland training. Training exercises involve wildland fire suppression tactics, fire behavior, weather, structure protection and actions used to protect firefighters while working in a firestorm. Since 2006, we have placed 94 new fire engines into frontline service, and maintained a fleet of 61 reserve fire engines. We also have 32 fire hand crews at strategically located camps across the County's mountain ranges.

Another important component is our staffing of three highly trained and organized Incident Management Teams which are ready at all times in the event of a major incident. These teams train throughout the year in incident command, public information, safety, operations, planning, logistics and finance.

On a daily basis, we monitor local weather conditions and initiate increased fire suppression staffing and equipment levels in the event of predicted fire weather. We place additional helicopters on call, and position five strike teams in vulnerable areas around the County prior to

the predicted arrival of Santa Ana wind conditions. This has been our practice for years, based upon our historical knowledge of fire behavior in our region.

While the California Mutual Aid system is critically essential in our ability to respond to multiple, large scale wildland fires, acquiring additional resources and increasing reserve fire engines is an important step in strengthening the response capability of each agency. Mutual Aid takes time to activate, and during fire sieges in which multiple incidents are underway, waiting for resources to be released from one incident and assigned to another can be challenging. In Los Angeles County, we greatly increased our own ability to respond by having a strong fleet of reserve engines equipped for wildland fire response.

During the height of the battle in the October firestorms, 127 out of 232 total fire engines were engaged in firefighting at six major incidents. The Ranch Fire, ignited by downed power lines, broke out at 9:42 p.m., on October 20, 2007, north of Castaic near the Ventura County line and the Angeles National Forest, burning 58,041 acres; no structures were lost. Los Angeles County resources deployed included 20 fire engines, one fire hand crew, three dozers, two SuperScoopers and 137 firefighters. Mutual Aid resources deployed included 125 fire engines, 21 fire hand crews, six helicopters, nine dozers and 1,131 firefighters, for a total of 1,268 personnel.

The Canyon Fire, also ignited by downed power lines, broke out at 4:55 a.m., on October 21, 2007, in fire-prone Malibu; 4,565 acres burned, nine homes and four commercial buildings were lost, and 10 homes and 8 commercial buildings were damaged. Los Angeles County resources deployed included 78 fire engines, 24 fire hand crews, seven helicopters, two dozers, two SuperScoopers and 817 firefighters. Mutual Aid resources deployed included 132 fire engines, eight helicopters, four dozers and 952 firefighters, for a total of 1,769 personnel.

The Buckweed Fire, caused by a juvenile playing with matches, broke on at 12:55 p.m., on October 21, 2007, in Agua Dulce/Canyon Country, burning 38,356 acres; 21 homes were destroyed and 12 homes were damaged. Los Angeles County resources deployed included 49 fire engines, 14 fire hand crews, three dozers, two SuperScoopers and 461 firefighters. Mutual Aid resources deployed included 90 fire engines, 28 fire hand crews, 19 dozers and 700 firefighters, for a total of 1,161 personnel.

The Magic Fire, accidentally sparked by construction workers using a grinding tool, broke out at 2:17 p.m., on October 22, 2007, near Stevenson Ranch in the Santa Clarita Valley, burning 2,824 acres; no homes were lost or damaged. Los Angeles County resources included 21 fire engines, four fire hand crews, four helicopters, two SuperScoopers and 97 firefighters. Mutual Aid resources included five fire engines and 21 firefighters, for a total of 118 personnel.

The Meadow Ridge Fire, still under investigation for its cause, broke out at 4:08 a.m., on October 23, 2007, in Santa Clarita, burning 40 acres; no structures were lost or damaged. Los Angeles County resources deployed included 30 fire engines, six fire hand crews, four helicopters, two SuperScoopers and 179 firefighters. Mutual Aid resources deployed included five fire engines, three helicopters and 28 firefighters, for a total of 207 personnel.

The Y Fire, still under investigation for its suspicious origin, broke out at 2:44 p.m., on October 23, 2007, in Acton in the Antelope Valley, burning 20 acres; no structures were lost or damaged. Los Angeles County resources deployed included 10 fire engines, eight fire hand crews, four helicopters, two SuperScoopers and 132 firefighters. Mutual Aid resources were not requested, as County firefighters were able to quickly knock down this fire at 20 acres.

In total, over 1,800 Los Angeles County firefighters worked around the clock on these wildfires. Many personnel, various aircraft and other firefighting units were moved from one fire to the other as conditions warranted. Our team of highly skilled fire mechanics kept every available front line and reserve fire engine rolling. Our ability to keep our fleet of nine firefighting helicopters in the air, including three Sikorsky Firehawks with 1,000-gallon water dropping capacity and six Bell 412 helicopters with 360-gallon capacity, made a decisive difference time and time again on fire after fire. Our three contracted aircraft - two 1,600-gallon capacity SuperScooper airplanes and one 2,200-gallon capacity Type 1 Erickson Helitanker - aided our firefighters during daylight hours to give them the edge that they needed to combat each fire. Routine Los Angeles County firefighting staffing also included 32, 15-member fire hand crews, eight bulldozer tractors, 13 bulldozer tenders, 12 bulldozer transport trucks, 37 fire patrols and our 61 reserve fire engines.

Behind the scenes, our Dispatch team kept the Emergency Coordination Center at Command and Control staffed and activated for that entire week, as the Region I Mutual Aid resources were keenly mobilized.

Although we received Mutual Aid resources on most of our wildfire incidents in Los Angeles County in October, we have built our own air attack program to enable us to quickly contain the fire while it still remains relatively small. Despite all of our pre-planning and pre-deployment measures, the Mutual Aid system still played a major role in our ability to respond and contain these fires, saving hundreds of homes each time. During these wind-driven events, no fire department can stand on its own.

While all of this was happening in our own jurisdiction, we were keenly aware of the other 18 large wildfires underway throughout Southern California. As Region 1 Coordinator, we identified and dispatched resources within Los Angeles County and to our neighboring counties through

the California Master Mutual Aid System. The Mutual Aid system was developed to provide assistance to other emergency response agencies whenever an incident is beyond the capability of that jurisdictional agency. During these firestorms, we tracked assignment of Mutual Aid units that might be available to assist other Region 1 agencies.

Also available to assist us is the U.S. Navy. Through our agreement, they provide their "Hovercraft" Landing Craft Air Cushions (LCAC) to transport equipment and personnel from the Los Angeles Harbor to our jurisdiction on Catalina Island. This made a major difference in our ability to respond in May 2007, when construction workers accidentally ignited a brush fire near the City of Avalon. Thousands of residents and tourists were evacuated, and hundreds of firefighters and fire equipment needed quick transport.

At the height of our incidents, the entire Mutual Aid system was stretched. Across Southern California, 15,000 firefighters worked for 10 days around the clock to battle 22 challenging wildfires that burned 518,000 acres, killed seven people and injured 116, and destroyed 2,008 homes. Despite this loss of life and property, over one million residents were successfully evacuated and thousands of threatened homes and businesses were saved. Collectively, from October 21-31, 2007, firefighters were able to suppress 251 vegetation fires on initial attack, stopping them from becoming larger wildfires.

Our philosophy is that a strong Mutual Aid system does not relieve a locality of its responsibility to assess jurisdictional threats and prepare for them. We, at the Los Angeles County Fire Department have invested in more resources of our own, whether through direct acquisition or creation of seasonal lease agreements, so that additional resources are readily available to attack wildfires quickly and keep them small. This operational strategy has been embraced by our County leaders, and has been instrumental in our ability to build our own resources over the

years. Our Contract Aircraft Program, including two Super Scooper airplanes and a Type I helitanker, is an excellent example of how we supplement our resources when needed during fire season without adding considerable, ongoing expense to our annual budget.

We recognized the need for this following the devastating 1993 firestorms in Malibu and Altadena, when hundreds of homes were taken. With contracted resources and help from state and federal agencies, we were able to save hundreds of homes over this past Thanksgiving weekend, when the Corral Fire ravaged Malibu just weeks after the Canyon Fire. The conditions that we faced back in 1993 and again just two weeks ago were so intense that even placing a fire engine in front of each home would not have saved all of them because this was a natural disaster, a firestorm!

Fire departments also need a systematic, dependable way to be reimbursed for providing assistance to others. Some agencies have refused to send help because they do not initially know whether or not they will not be reimbursed. This weakens our Mutual Aid system and defeats its purpose.

Recommendations

We submit four recommendations to help all of us continue to improve our collective ability to fight these massive wildfires:

- The State needs to increase its surge capacity through the acquisition of more fire engines;
- A Federal/State partnership needs to be established to identify funding for pre-deployment costs and Mutual Aid response;
- The Federal fleet of air assets needs to be upgraded, and
- Federal/State sponsorship to fast track applied technology to create a real-time, GPS-based mapping system for incident commanders to view the fire in progress to help pre-establish a base of operations.